

The impact of preparing mentor teachers for mentoring

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Abstract

Time spent in classrooms is reported to be the component of teacher education degrees that pre-service teachers highly value as it allows them to practise teach in an authentic setting (Brandenburg & Ryan, 2001; Brett, 2006; Graves, 2010; House of Representatives, 2007; Walkington, 2005a). Despite this, the experiences pre-service teachers encounter varies greatly and these experiences can be directly related to their placement and the mentor teacher to whom they are assigned. In the move from a supervisory model to a mentoring model in pre-service teacher education at many universities, the assumption was made that mentoring would assist in resolving the variance in experiences pre-service teachers encounter during their professional placements. However, it has since been found that those who volunteer to mentor a pre-service teacher may not inherently know how to mentor another. In this respect, mentor teachers may not understand the complexities of the nature of mentoring, the roles of mentors and mentees and how mentoring occurs in the pre-service teacher context (Ambrosetti & Dekkers, 2010). In an environment where mentoring and supervision are intertwined, a lack of confidence on the part of mentor teachers about how to provide worthwhile experiences for pre-service teachers will remain if mentoring is neither defined, nor a process of mentoring provided (Hudson, 2004; Walkington, 2005b). This research investigated the role of professional development in the preparation of mentor teachers for their mentoring role. Specifically, this paper presents the findings of a pilot mentoring preparation course that focused on the nature of mentoring, the role of both mentors and mentees as well as the process of mentoring. Data was gathered about changed understandings of mentoring, as well as the changed mentoring practices of the mentor teachers who participated. As such, the findings presented will inform the development of further professional development courses for mentor teachers who intend to mentor pre-service teachers.

Introduction

Pre-service teacher education providers are reliant on qualified and experienced teachers to mentor those beginning their professional journey (Walkington, 2005a). Teachers who mentor a pre-service teacher during a professional placement often volunteer to do so. Remuneration for mentoring a pre-service teacher is limited therefore many classroom teachers who volunteer do so in order to 'give back to the profession'. However research which concerns mentoring in the pre-service teacher context has found that few teachers receive training or preparation for mentoring. In many instances, it is assumed that if a teacher is considered to be effective in the classroom, then they will naturally be able to pass on their skills and knowledge to another through the act of mentoring. This is often not the case as mentoring is not an inherent skill, but a skill that can be developed through preparation (Hennissen, Crasborn, Brouwer, Korthagen & Bergen, 2011). Although mentoring is used as an approach in pre-service teacher education to assist in the practical development of the neophytes knowledge and skills in teaching, it has only been recently recognised as a broad element of a teacher's professional role. Recently, acknowledgement of the benefits of mentoring for teachers within the profession has occurred at both a state and national level. However in the current climate of recognising the benefits of mentoring for classroom based teachers, it has also been recognised that preparation for the role of mentor is needed.

Background literature

There is no one definition of mentoring in the context of pre-service teacher education, however mentoring encompasses three components, namely relational, developmental and contextual (Ambrosetti, 2011; Lai, 2005). Many definitions of mentoring tend to focus on one or two of the components, however the three components of mentoring interconnect to develop a holistic mentoring relationship. The relational component of mentoring concerns the nature of the relationship between the mentor and the mentee. Mentoring is seen as a reciprocal relationship, one where each participant has something to share, contribute to and receive benefits from (Ambrosetti & Dekkers, 2010; Heirdsfield, Walker, Walsh & Wilss, 2008; Kamvounias, McGrath-Champ & Yip, 2007). The relational component also concerns the specific roles the mentor undertakes within the relationship such as supporting the mentee, being a colleague and/or friend, as well as guiding and protecting the mentee within the learning context (Ambrosetti & Dekkers, 2010; Eby, Rhodes & Allen, 2007; Tillema, Smith & Leshem, 2011).

In contrast to the relational component, the developmental component centres on the professional needs of the mentor and mentee. This component also concerns the specific roles the mentor undertakes in order to assist in the development of the pre-service teachers knowledge and skills. These roles consist of collaborator, facilitator, teacher and role model. However the capabilities and needs of the mentee should shape the interactions that occur within the relationship (Bearman, Blake-Beard, Hunt & Crosby, 2007; Cransborn Hennissen, Brouwer, Korthagen & Bergen, 2008; Schwille, 2008; Smith, 2007). The final component, the contextual component, concerns the situation and circumstance of where and how the mentoring relationship occurs. The contextual component of mentoring in the pre-service

teacher context centres on the work of a teacher and involves the day-to-day management of the classroom and learners as well as the functioning of a teacher within the school community (Ambrosetti, 2011).

Although the components of mentoring have been described as individual elements, as stated previously, the components are interconnected and create a holistic approach to mentoring. That is, the roles undertaken by mentors within a mentoring relationship are specific to each individual component of mentoring, but due to the complexity of mentoring and the multifaceted nature of each role, are interconnected and one role may lend itself its self to several components.

Ambrosetti and Dekkers (2010) describe mentoring in the pre-service teacher context as non-hierarchical and reciprocal, however the mentor teacher often leads the mentoring relationship. The mentor guides the mentee towards achieving professional growth by providing opportunities to design, teach and reflect on learning experiences throughout a practical placement. Many teachers choose to mentor in order to professionally contribute to the profession, or consider it as an opportunity for personal and/or professional growth (Walkington, 2005b). It has been reported that primarily, mentoring offers the classroom based teacher an opportunity to critically reflect on their own practice as well as revitalize their teaching practices (Walkington, 2004). Other documented advantages for mentors include a renewed enthusiasm for the job, making a difference in another's professional and/or personal life, enhanced collegiality and a self improved work ethic (Lai, 2005; McGee, 2001; Walkington, 2005a and 2005b). As such, mentoring a pre-service teacher provides the mentor opportunities for professional learning (AITSL, 2011). Although the advantages for mentoring a pre-service teacher are well documented, there are also reported disadvantages of mentoring. Previous research has identified disadvantages such as an increased workload, added responsibility and stress, uncertainty about how to mentor and having to make a judgement about or provide a grade regarding the progress of the pre-service teacher (Walkington, 2005b).

Although there are both advantages and disadvantages of mentoring a pre-service teacher, many classroom teachers at one time or another take the opportunity to work with a learner teacher. However it is often assumed that the classroom teacher's experience will enable them to mentor a pre-service teacher effectively and provide a worthwhile experience for the pre-service teacher (Gagen & Bowie, 2005). In actuality, it has been reported that many classroom teachers are not well prepared for mentoring, more so when difficulties arise with the pre-service teacher (Giebelhaus & Bowman, 2002; Valeni & Vogrinc, 2007). Mentoring practices, according to Wang and Odell (2002) can be formed by preparation for mentoring. Specifically Wang and Odell (2002, p.525) report that "research suggests that mentor preparation can substantially influence knowledge of particular mentoring techniques and skills to shape their mentoring practice".

Preparation for mentoring has not been a priority in many pre-service teacher education programs. In cases where preparation courses have been available for those volunteering to mentor a pre-service teacher, they are often program specific and do not inform about the

nature and role of mentoring (Hall, Draper, Smith & Bullough, 2008). Rather preparation for mentoring tends to outline requirements and tasks that are specific to the course the pre-service teachers are undertaking. Research which has investigated the effects of mentoring on pre-service teachers suggests that mentor training increases the positive impacts that mentoring can have on the growth of both skills and knowledge of the mentee (Evertson & Smithey, 2000; Giebelhaus & Bowman, 2002). Descriptions of what makes an effective mentor are common within the mentoring literature, however it is agreed that a quality mentor is one who understands the specific goals of mentoring in the context in which they are working and are familiar with the tasks to be undertaken by the mentee (Valeni & Vogrinc, 2007). It has also been identified that a quality mentor in pre-service teacher education has both the knowledge and the competency to mentor (Graves, 2010). Knowing how to mentor another involves the active construction and reconstruction of knowledge (Tang & Choi, 2007). In the context of pre-service teacher education, the mentor teacher needs the cognitive skills in which to not only pass on knowledge and skills, but also use them and justify them in regards to the learners, the curriculum and pedagogy. As such particular competency skills which mentors need include communication, collaborative and evaluative skills, as well as problem solving and decision making skills (Gagen & Bowie, 2005; Graves, 2010).

Research methodology and context

This study investigated a pilot mentoring course for classroom based teachers mentoring a pre-service teacher. The professional development program entitled 'Mentoring Certificate' focused specifically on mentoring practices and was non-program specific. That is, there were no references to program requirements or tasks that pre-service teachers were required to do whilst on their practicum. The mentoring certificate was designed with two objectives in mind:

1. To create opportunities for reflection on the mentors own teaching practices so that pre-service teachers are mentored effectively.
2. To create opportunities for mentor teachers to identify their own mentoring style and consider mentoring processes in order to plan for mentoring.

The mentoring certificate was designed to be delivered through four after school sessions. Each session was two hours in length and the sessions occurred weekly. The course included topics that concerned the nature of mentoring, roles in mentoring and approaches to mentoring. The course utilised researched based readings, a mentoring framework and a personal mentoring plan template. The structure of the course was designed so that participants had the opportunity to engage in professional conversations and reflective activities, as well as to develop knowledge of mentoring and apply the knowledge to their own context. The course also included reflective homework activities for the participants to complete between sessions. The purpose of the homework activities was to encourage active application of learning. The professional development used the knowledge transmission model for implementation. The knowledge transmission model is described by Wang and Odell (2002) as facilitated professional development whereby a presenter presents

information to the participants (mentor teachers) who then apply it in their own time and way. This model of implementation was chosen due to time constraints and funding issues.

Eleven teachers participated in the professional development course. Nine of the teachers had been teaching for more than fifteen years with two teachers having taught for less than five years. The range of experience of mentoring amongst the participants correlates to the number of years teaching. As such, the more experienced teachers had mentored many pre-service teachers and the teachers with limited teaching experience had only mentored one pre-service teacher previously.

This research utilised qualitative survey research. A short survey was used to gather a variety of data about the professional development course and the learnings participants realised. This paper reports on the questions that concerned changed understandings of mentoring and changed practices of mentoring as a result of participating in the professional development. The four questions asked are as follows.

1. What have you achieved from the course?
2. How did the course promote change how you mentor pre-service teachers?
3. Briefly describe some of the processes you use when mentoring a pre-service teacher
4. What were the changes in your mentoring practices?

The survey was implemented three months after the completion of the mentoring course. The responses to the questions were analysed qualitatively and were coded into themes. It is important to note that this research did not collect data on mentoring practices prior to the participants undertaking the course, therefore this research did not compare mentoring practices before and after, nor did it measure changed practices by way of a scale. This can be considered a limitation of the research as the survey has only gathered data about perceived changes in mentoring understandings and practices. A further limitation of the research is the small sample size.

Results and discussion

The results presented in this paper focus specifically on two categories of questions responded to by the mentoring certificate participants, namely changed understandings of mentoring and changed mentoring practices. The results will be discussed according to the two categories of questions and the key themes which emerged from the analysis. The key themes will be linked, where appropriate, to the three components of mentoring as described earlier in this paper. Due to the open ended nature of the questions asked in this section of the survey, responses from the participants will guide the discussion of the results.

Changed understandings of mentoring

There were three key themes that emerged from the responses regarding changed understandings of mentoring. The first theme that emerged was that of a changed understanding of roles in mentoring, in particular the roles of the mentor. The roles undertaken by a mentor are numerous in number and are multifaceted (Ambrosetti & Dekkers, 2010; Hall et al., 2008). Generally mentors tend to see their role as one that

supports the mentee, however the support role involves further sub-roles such as those of giver of feedback, providing opportunities for the mentee and role modelling. The roles of the mentor then interconnect with the roles of the mentee (Ambrosetti & Dekkers, 2010). The support role is typically an element of the relational component. The complexity of mentor roles was an identified changed understanding as reflected in the following participant response.

I have a much better understanding of the role of the mentor teacher and the mentee. I started the course thinking there was a clear 'role' and specific jobs covered by the mentor – the course certainly clarified my understanding that mentoring is not clear-cut. Respondent E

According to Valeni & Vogrinc (2007), being familiar with the roles of a mentor assists in creating quality mentoring. As such, self-efficacy plays a large part in the conception of the how the mentoring process occurs (Hall et al., 2008). Hence, the realisation of how complex the role of a mentor lead some participants to reflect upon the impact they have on the development of the pre-service teacher.

It certainly changed my perceptions of the role of a mentor and made me realise that the specific role I play is more important than I had previously thought.
Respondent C

In addition, the mentor teachers realised that the role of a mentor is not just a support role but one which assists in developing essential teaching knowledge and skills. Previous research has indicated that emotional support and the development of pre-service teacher's knowledge and skills work hand in hand in the mentoring process (Kwan & Lopez-Real, 2005; Lai, 2005).

I take it far more seriously as there is a realization of the role of shaping 'hearts and minds'. Respondent A

The second theme to emerge in this category was that of mentoring being understood as a reflective process. According to Walkington (2005b), a key difference between mentoring and supervisory processes is that of reflection by both the mentor teacher and the pre-service teacher. As such, reflective practice in the pre-service teacher education context involves evaluating beliefs and practices through interpersonal development (Walkington, 2005b). The respondents in this research indicated that they realised that mentoring needed to be individualised and that reflective processes ensured a mentoring experience that met their own needs as well as the pre-service teacher's needs.

A greater insight into the complexity of mentoring. Especially that it is very dependent on situation, environment and individual person. Respondent D

A greater understanding of the mentoring process and surprisingly a more professional approach to my teaching. Respondent G

The final theme to emerge from the responses was one of a learning community. Several of the respondents indicated that they understood mentoring to be a complex process and that they may not always know the answer or know what to do when mentoring a pre-service teacher. In this respect, talking, sharing and networking with others who were also mentoring provided clarification with requirements and expectations, as well as opportunities to share strategies and find solutions to issues. Thus mentors appreciated time to talk with other mentors (LeCornu, 2010). In the professional placement within the pre-service teacher context, the focus is often on the learning that occurs between the mentor and mentee, however the learning that occurs between mentors is equally as important as reflected in the following participant response.

I now understand that I can't know everything in relation to my pre-service teacher, but I know that I should ask for help from my fellow mentors when I am unsure or need options as we are all still learners in an ever evolving curriculum.
Respondent B

Changed mentoring practices

It has been established earlier in this paper from previous mentoring research that preparation for mentoring makes a difference for both the mentor and mentee. Each of the mentor teachers in this research indicated that they had changed their mentoring practices, both implicitly and explicitly, as a result of participating in the mentoring course. The three components of mentoring were clear themes that emerged from the responses to the questions that targeted changed mentoring practices. As such the relational, development and contextual components will guide the discussion of results along with direct responses from the participants.

The changed mentoring practices identified by the respondents that concerned the relational aspect of mentoring tended to focus on the support aspect of their role. This result correlates to the changed understandings participants had of the roles of the mentor. According to the literature supporting a pre-service teacher involves such actions as creating a comfortable learning environment, setting expectations, giving feedback, offering of encouragement and providing direction (Hall et al. 2008; Kwan & Lopez-Real, 2005; Maynard, 2000). The results indicate that the mentors became more conscious of the support they provide to pre-service teachers through the way they include them in the classroom as reflected in the following response.

I am more explicit with my expectations, yet more understanding of where the mentee is at in his/her journey. I make sure he understands his role in class and is confident to ask questions. I have more compassion and understanding of the 'passions' of a pre-service teacher. Respondent B

As such, it is clear that the personal relationship that develops between the mentor and mentee becomes central to the outcomes achieved through the professional experience (Ambrosetti, 2012). In particular this is evident when the mentor takes on the role of

assessor. Within the literature, assessment is not an element of mentoring, however in pre-service teacher education, higher education institutions expect that the mentor teacher will assign a grade or provide a mark of progress for the pre-service teacher as part of their role. This role is often a concern for mentors and is one that can create tension and stress (Walkington, 2005b). As such assessment in pre-service teacher education professional placements has the potential to create a power struggle and an atmosphere of distrust between the mentor and mentee (Jones, 2000; Fransson, 2010; LeMaistre, Boudreau & Pare 2006; Tillema et al. 2011). The results from this research indicate that the mentors became cognisant of the link between the support provided to the pre-service teachers and the relationship developed with them, which in turn leads to a shared understanding of the expectations and standards that the pre-service teachers need to achieve.

I am making a concerted effort to establish a more personal relationship than I had been doing previously. I am also encouraging the mentee to take risks without fear of being penalised in the assessment. Respondent C

The developmental component of mentoring was a strong element within the identified changed practices of mentors. The professional placement provides the opportunity for the pre-service teacher to develop the craft of teaching and make links between theory and practice. However each pre-service teacher has specific developmental needs despite the specified tasks required of him or her to perform during the placement (Ambrosetti, 2012). The theme of collaboration emerged in the developmental aspect of mentoring. Collaboration in a pre-service teacher professional placement context would see the mentor and mentee planning together and teaching together, however this would be dependent on the level of the pre-service teacher (Fairbanks, Freeman & Kahn, 2000). The type of collaboration that the mentor teachers identified in this research was that mentoring needs to be a shared journey that is comfortable but meets the needs of the pre-service teacher as reflected in the following response.

I am sharing the journey and making sure that the journey changes as we meet the personal needs of the pre-service teacher, I encourage, laugh, listen and question. I am pushing the envelope, but making sure they are comfortable with that. Respondent A

Other changed practices involved the more practical aspects of the developmental role. Mentors were more aware of how and what the pre-service teachers should be involved in so that they were gaining a range of experiences. These aspects involve the day-to-day routines and as well as the roles the pre-service teacher was going to undertake during the day.

I brief the pre-service teacher on day's timetable and make sure the pre-service teacher is involved in every activity or lesson. We discuss his responsibilities and the types of tasks he will do during each lesson – whether it be observing, working with a group or helping a specific child. Respondent B

As well as including the pre-service teachers in the more practical day-to-day functions of a teacher's job, the mentors also recognised changes in their own operational functions when working with a pre-service teacher. Mentors understood the need to organise time to converse with the mentee about the day's activities and lessons, as well as for feedback about teaching experiences. Mentors were also more aware of the need to map out opportunities for the pre-service teacher to be involved in a range of experiences. Thus, mentoring a novice appeared to provide the motivation for mentors to change their own organisational behaviours (Gagen & Bowie, 2005; Walkington, 2005b) as reflected in the following response.

I find I am more structured and organised, not so ad hoc with mentoring any more. We are having formal discussions to cover set topics, but also discussing teaching moments as they occur. I am providing regular, but more specific feedback after each session, day, and week. Respondent E

The context of mentoring, according to Cherin (2007), and Fairbanks et al. (2000) can shape the nature and quality of the relationship. However previous research has identified that the contextual component of mentoring is not well addressed in pre-service teacher education as it often occurs implicitly rather than being an explicit part of mentoring (Ambrosetti, 2011). The contextual component of mentoring in pre-service teacher education centres on the job of a teacher inside and outside of the classroom. In this research the respondents indicated that the mentoring course had provided an awareness of including the pre-service teacher in not just the classroom routines, but also the wider school environment.

Making more of an effort to broaden the mentee's practical experience by involving them in a variety of meetings and arranging for them to visit other classes. Respondent C

Making sure they understand everything around the school environment.
Respondent F

It can be seen from the results and discussion that there is a specific correlation between changed understandings and changed mentoring practices. The results indicate that the mentor teachers who participated in the mentoring certificate became explicitly aware of the relational, developmental and contextual elements of their role as mentor. The changed understandings the participants developed impacted on the mentoring practices they employed with their pre-service teachers. This result indicates that the changes in mentoring practices encompassed a more holistic approach to mentoring.

Conclusion

It can be concluded from the results of this research that preparation for mentoring made a difference in both the understanding of mentoring as well as becoming aware of the mentoring practices being used. Although this research did not measure the changes or compare before and after, it is obvious that the mentor teachers in this research benefited

from specific knowledge about the nature of mentoring and the process of mentoring. The professional placement is an integral component of pre-service teacher education courses, therefore classroom teachers will always be called upon to mentor the next generation of teachers. The results have identified that training for teachers that centres on the act of mentoring, mentoring roles and approaches to mentoring can provide skills and knowledge about mentoring and assist in ensuring a quality experience for pre-service teachers during a professional placement.

The pilot mentoring course that this research has investigated was non-program specific and focused specifically on the process of mentoring. However, it is acknowledged that in order to effectively mentor, mentors also need specific program knowledge around the requirements of the pre-service teacher education course. Importantly, this research has shown that further research is needed which concerns the role of preparation for mentoring in the pre-service teacher context. In particular, research that examines the impact of specific mentoring training in regards to the outcomes achieved by the pre-service teachers could provide data about its effectiveness. A further area for research should focus on the impact of preparation for mentoring in regards to the professional learning of the classroom teacher. Such research has the potential to develop mentoring packages that specifically centres on the professional development of mentor teachers.

As a final conclusion it must be noted that there is no one recipe for success in mentoring. Mentoring is multi-faceted and is dependent upon the individuals in the relationship, however understanding the nature of mentoring, the process of mentoring and the distinct components that are encompassed in mentoring will provide an informed approach that can enable all participants in mentoring to meet their goals.

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